

The Washingtonian

By Joseph Goulden

tom Post

SPIRO T. AGNEW, both before and after becoming Vice President, has been a man of table-thumping emotions. Agnew is not a noted swearer—his occasional freshets of profanity lack the combinative ingenuity of Lyndon Johnson and the several Kennedys, and wouldn't cause even a bishop to blush. No, Agnew is a direct person, one who shows anger with a spread-palmed *wwwWHAMPPPPppp* on whatever flat surface happens to be under hand. It is a healthy, archphysical venting that rids a man of anger and tension, and permits a swift return to tranquility, once the echo of the thunderclap dies away.

Spiro Agnew's smack the morning of September 25, 1968, was a real hand-reddener. There he was, not even through the first paragraph of the lead editorial of his then favorite morning newspaper, the *Washington Post*, when he found the contumelious lines:

"Given enough time, Nixon's decision ('I seriously considered more than a dozen able men') to name Agnew may come to be regarded as perhaps the most eccentric political appointment since the Roman Emperor Caligula named his horse a consul."

Spiro Agnew was still howling—figuratively, because men who slap desks can be furious and calm simultaneously—three months later when he met *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Meyer Graham at a dinner hosted by Mel Elfin, Washington bureau chief of her *Newsweek* magazine. "It really grated on him, you could tell," Mrs. Graham recalls now. "He must have referred to it ten times during the evening. I suppose it was a jolt to him, for this was early in his exposure to national politics, and he wasn't used to this sort of criticism. He kept repeating, 'Comparing me to a horse. Really, that's getting pretty low.'"

A politician's wrath at a newspaper is normally one of Washington's more transient events, yet the Caligula's Horse Editorial—they pronounce it with capital letters at the *Post*—is relevant here for several reasons.

—First, of course, Agnew's tiff with the *Post* has escalated into the most sus-

tained assault ever upon the media by a national administration, with the Vice President complaining of "the monopolization of the great public information vehicles and the concentration of more and more power over public opinion in fewer and fewer hands." Spiro Agnew veritably made the *Washington Post* a household word in the tank towns and restless suburbs of Silent Majoritania.

—Second, some highly responsible executives of the *Post*, including Philip Geyelin, editor of the editorial page, trace the Vice President's attacks right back to Caligula's horse. Such an interpretation, if valid, gives Agnew only shallow, personalistic motivation for what amounts to a no-holds-barred confrontation with the nation's press. It should be obvious to discerning Americans by now that Agnew is stalking heavier game; were he angry over one editorial, a letter to the man who wrote it—Ward Just, one hears at the *Post*—would have been artillery enough. Yet the Vice President's now famed "Montgomery Speech" of November 20, 1969, in which he first attacked the *Post* and the *New York Times*, does contain a peculiarly revealing sentence which supports Geyelin's theory. "It is not an easy thing," Agnew said, "to wake up each morning to learn that some prominent man or institution has implied that you are a bigot, a racist, or a fool."

—Third, the editorial's savage bite, couched in the *bon motes* of a Georgetown cocktail party, does much to explain why few people in Washington are entirely neutral about the *Washington Post*. Whether it is a superior newspaper is a question we shall address. Suffice to say now that the *Post's* attitude is supinely superior, even when dealing with its friends. And the line is intellectual calls sophisticated and a famed

Southwestern President calls wise-ass. Organizational monstrosity though it may be, with the frequent elbowish manners of an oafish teenager, the *Post* does have a distinctive personality. And it also faces the problem of writing for what executive editor Ben Bradlee calls "100,000 policy makers and 100,000 policy players."

—Finally, the *Post* you read this morning was produced in an office which, in the past five years, has experienced a complete turnover of editorial and news direction. Power struggles—whether they occur in newspapers, in political parties, or in humdrum insurance offices—produce common results: changed procedures and philosophies of doing business; hurt feelings among the losers who are still around; a mixture of exhilaration and wariness among the winners. The *Post's* key news editors are now without exception "Bradlee men," and Bradlee uses a recurring word when he talks about the *Post*. "Impact," he says, "I want to have some impact on this town and this country. I want to know they are reading us. Impact."

Bradlee's name is atop the editorial masthead. Yet titles don't always equate with power. I called Ben Bagdikian two months after Bradlee made him the Post's national editor. I asked, "Who makes the decisions at the Post? Why is it run like it is?"

Bagdikian is an old acquaintance, and he has an ebullient Armenian humor—the sort which permits men to speak the most heretical of truths through jest—and he replied, "If you find out, please let me know."

The person who controls the *Post*, via 50.1 percent ownership of the Washington Post Company, and has her name highest on the masthead,